



Academic Event Report

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Conference: European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) Conference

Venue: Tirana, Albania

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The annual conference of the European Network for Housing Research (ENHR) takes place in a different European city each year. Bringing together over 250 housing researchers from around the world, the 2017 conference took place in Tirana, Albania. The theme of the conference was “Affordable Housing for All: Redefining the roles of public and private sector”. The three-day conference consisted of eight plenary sessions, five workshop sessions and a choice from a number of field trips. The workshops covered a whole range of areas related to housing including Collaborative Housing; Housing and Urban Sustainability; Housing and Family Dynamics; Land Market and Housing Policy; Private Rented Markets; Social Housing: Institutions, Organisations and Governance; and Welfare Policy, Homelessness and Social Exclusion. As the conference includes the presentation of hundreds of papers, just a few of the most memorable ones will be discussed in this report.

The opening session consisted of introductions, leading into the first plenary on the Albanian context of housing and urban development. This focused on the fact that self-build is the predominant form of new housing building, with extensive areas of informal housing that are currently in the process of being formalised. Through building informally during the 1990s, the people of Albania were able to address their immediate need for housing which was not being met through the underdeveloped housing market and a lack of institutional response in the form of spatial planning and social housing. This presentation was interesting as it described a very different housing context to that in Ireland, despite both countries experiencing high levels of housing need. Professor Erik Swyngedouw (University of Manchester) presented a keynote address at the following plenary which proved to be one of the most memorable of the conference. Swyngedouw’s impassioned and provocative speech entitled “City or Polis? Antinomies of the Post-Democratic City”, argued that we are living in a post-democratic world, with unprecedented polarisation, including evictions, housing

problems and immigration in contrast to the extreme wealth of a few. However, Swyngedouw argued that since 2011 there have been signs of discontent with this situation as urban unrest has increased with movements such as Occupy and the development of left-wing parties Podemos (Spain), Syriza (Greece) and the rise of Corbyn's Labour party in the UK. The most dramatic element of Swyngedouw's presentation was when he turned away from the audience's view a bank sponsor's board advertisement that was placed on the stage, stating that this was only right due to the nature of his presentation. This, and the other plenaries, prompted lively discussions and plenty of questions from delegates. Most notable of these were the discussions that followed the evening talk with architect Jan Gehl entitled "City for the People", based on his book of the same name. This inspiring talk focused on the transformation of urban environments, through the application of Gehl's research into the ways that people use or could potentially use the spaces in which they live and work. Most inspiring was his assertion that cities should be experienced at the speed of walking rather than the speed of a car, or other motorised transport. In other words, to Gehl people should be at the very core of urban living so that they can live in a city that is lively, safe, sustainable and healthy. This will require structural changes in the city centre such as increased cycling infrastructure, as well as widened paths and narrowed roads to increase the space for pedestrians. This prompted a lot of discussion from the delegates during the evening reception around their own cities' situation with regards to its 'liveability'.

I attended the Welfare Policy, Homelessness and Social Exclusion workshop as it is most closely related to my area of research. As a presenter, it was an opportunity to gain feedback on my research from well-known international homelessness researchers including Ingrid Sahlin of Lund University in Sweden, Lars Benjaminsen of the Danish National Centre for Research, Magdalena Mostowska of the University of Warsaw, Evelyn Dyb of the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, and Joe Finnerty of University College Cork. There was a total of 13 papers presented at the workshop which focused on a range of areas including conceptualising homelessness, the delivery of homeless services and the impact of welfare reform on housing and homelessness.

Professor Ingrid Sahlin delivered a thought-provoking paper on what the construction of the term 'the homeless' implies, and what the contrasting term 'our homeless' includes, implies and excludes. Sahlin used the analogy of Simmel's (1908) definition of 'the poor' as the group who receives assistance due to their lack of means, arguing that 'the homeless' includes only those people for whom society, municipalities and charities acknowledge a responsibility to give shelter. Through an analysis of debates in the Swedish parliament, Sahlin showed that the term 'our homeless' is used to reinforce the boundaries between those

considered to be ‘the homeless’ and those temporarily accommodated by authorities other than those who provide homeless services. Examples of these excluded groups include asylum seekers, undocumented migrants and newly arrived migrants. Sahlin discussed how ‘the homeless’ are embraced with some compassion and empathy, while terms used for those who are ‘othered’, such as Roma, refugees, migrants and beggars, do not carry the same kind of protective imperative. Rather, the negative connotations associated with these terms are often further reinforced by combining them with phenomena such as crime, disorder and violation of property rights. According to Sahlin, through this positioning of ‘our homeless’ against those who are ‘othered’, the action demanded of the government is that they position themselves against the latter and thus make it easier for them to be evicted, removed from public and private land, expelled from the country or stopped at the border.

Another presentation which was particularly interesting was given by Dr Angela Spinney (Swinburn University of Technology, Melbourne). This research, conducted with Dr Farnaz Zirakbash, looked into the ways that homeless services identify and respond to domestic violence. As many women who present themselves to homeless services do not specifically identify themselves as experiencing domestic violence, Spinney argued that where services fail to identify them as such, the assessment of client risk and planning for client safety may prove to be inadequate. Spinney and Zirakbash argue that the utilisation of a standardised screening tool and a ‘tick box’ method can be useful from the female clients’ perspective, which is in contrast to the perspective of some professional staff that they interviewed. The use of such a tool should help practitioners to identify situations of domestic violence. However, it is important that it also assists clients in identifying significant issues in their own lives, as well as informing them about their options and possible routes for help. Spinney discussed the patchy use of screening tools, as well as the lack of awareness of some practitioners of the benefits of domestic violence screening for service users. According to Spinney, these issues should be remedied through the incorporation of family violence conditions in service and funding agreements for homeless services. As well as this, concerns among practitioners around causing harm or uncovering needs which required additional work on their part need to be addressed through staff training and adequate referral processes.

Overall the workshop’s presentations focused on a wide range of areas relating to homelessness. However, the conceptualisation of homelessness and how this impacts upon delivered services was a central focus. The ways that we decide who is, or is not, considered homeless, and how we consider the parameters of ‘need’, is of vital importance to potential service users. Definitions and parameters matter as they decide who is in and who is out. This

is an area that was discussed by a number of presenters, including Sahlin and Spinney. Indeed, it is likely that this is a discussion that will continue in the 2018 conference.

As always, the ENHR conference proved to be very interesting and thought provoking. I would strongly recommend this conference for researchers in the area of housing and related fields as it would be difficult to get feedback on your research from such a wide range of internationally renowned housing researchers in any other forum. It also provides you the opportunity to give other researchers feedback on their research. The ENHR 2019 conference takes place in Athens, Greece on August 27–30.

Niamh Murphy is a second year PhD student in University College Cork. She holds a Bachelor's degree and Master's in Social Science from University College Dublin. Niamh was awarded a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship by the Irish Research Council in 2016. Her PhD research focuses on the homelessness assessment process in Irish local authorities.